

## Working in neighbourhoods and villages

At the beginning of the previous Five Year Plan in 2010, the Universal House of Justice called on the Bahá'ís of the world to learn about intensifying efforts in neighbourhoods and villages. Since then, friends serving in many clusters have advanced significantly in their understanding of the dynamics underlying an expanding nucleus of individuals committed to Bahá'u'lláh's vision of a new World Order, particularly in a centre of intense activity. Experience has shown that empowering local populations in small settings is a fundamental capacity that enables the friends in a cluster to accelerate its movement along the continuum of growth.

An element that has been indispensable to cultivating a thriving process of community building is broadening the scope of the institute process by increasing the number of local inhabitants who are engaged in a rhythm of training and who are learning to apply the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh in their lives and in that of their communities. As these friends study, act and reflect on their experience, and bring others into a widening conversation about the well-being of their community, capacity is rapidly built and the impact of the Word of God is more visible as entire families, groups of youth, friends, and neighbours become protagonists in fostering a life of service and worship.

This issue of *Reflections on Growth* shares a few stories highlighting how the friends serving on institutions and agencies are gaining experience in establishing a rhythm of training and a system for accompanying individuals who arise from within a neighbourhood or village, how groups of people are learning together and supporting one another in expanding nuclei within small settings, and how the process of community building is being extended to involve more households and families.

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*In the following two accounts from Southeast Asia and North America, the friends have been working systematically in smaller areas within neighbourhoods to increase the number of local inhabitants that are engaged in a rhythm of training and to support each other in serving as children's class teachers, junior youth animators, and tutors.*

### **MALAYSIA**

The agencies and institutions in the **Klang** cluster, along with a team of collaborators residing locally, have made a concerted effort to intensify the pattern of action in a number of neighbourhoods, aiming to reach every household systematically and to invite families to become involved in the spiritual education of all their members.

From the outset, instead of conveying the idea of merely studying books, we invite the youth to contribute to their own development and the development of their communities. This approach creates a mindset focused on service. Each cycle, we have a group of newly found friends that starts to study the institute books and progress along the sequence of courses. At the same time, the parents of the youth involved are encouraged to participate in evening sessions to become familiar with the content of the training institute materials.

To establish an initial team of local tutors, animators, and teachers in each neighbourhood within each three-month cycle, in addition to ongoing study circles, institute campaigns are held over entire weekends and longer school holiday periods. Together with a team of collaborators, participants make daily visits to the neighbourhood, learn to invite families to take part in the educational programmes offered, and in the process, start their own children's classes and junior youth groups. Meanwhile, individuals being trained as tutors are assisted to form study circles, especially with their friends and neighbours. A significant amount of time is given to accompanying those beginning to walk a path of service. The cluster institute coordinators, together with the Area Teaching Committee and the Auxiliary Board member, work closely with the collaborators to prepare weekly visits to new teachers, animators, and tutors in the neighbourhood. Camps for children and junior youth are also held regularly so that friends who can only offer their time occasionally are enabled to serve.

To accelerate the process of growth and the development of capacity in friends from the locality, we have had to carry out our expansion phases more frequently—for instance, one week each month. In each neighbourhood, we conduct daily visits so that we can interact with as many local inhabitants as possible—particularly families—to significantly increase participation in children's classes and junior youth groups. In these small settings, it is mainly mothers who actively engage in a daily pattern—mornings which include dawn prayers, study, reflection, and planning, and afternoons dedicated to engaging friends in the neighbourhood through home visits, devotionals, study, planning for children's classes and junior youth groups, and consulting together.

Some of the neighbourhood settings in which we are working intensively are gated and guarded residential communities. We have noticed that the most effective time to meet people is between 5 p.m. and 7 p.m. since many are returning from work and school around that time; children are usually outside playing, while parents are on leisurely walks or watering their gardens. We invite neighbours to join the community-building activities and talk about the need for the spiritual empowerment of the younger generation. In some of the conversations we have had with parents, we have seen that they welcome the idea of giving attention to developing the characters of their children, and they often share that materialism and the pervasive use of social media has distanced their children from them. Families start by “giving a try” to the education programmes offered by the Bahá'í community, and as prayers and spiritual concepts are introduced in follow-up home visits to the families by children's class teachers and animators, parents take more interest. When they see the transformational effect of the programme on their children, they become receptive to holding family prayers and hosting devotional meetings, and eventually studying institute courses.

## CANADA

For almost a decade, the neighbourhood of **Greenboro** in Ottawa has been a focus of activity. Growth gained momentum through the arrival of a few pioneers, including an Auxiliary Board member and his family, as well as a number of youth serving full-time throughout the year and during summer breaks. While much of the strength of the neighbourhood was built around the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme, the

friends serving there realized that they would need to intensify their efforts to raise resources from within the local population in order to maintain growth. One of the believers describes the steps taken:

A few days before the bicentenary of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh, we set two goals for our neighbourhood: to have at least 10 celebrations hosted by youth from the local population, and to grow from around 10 core activities to 100 by the bicentenary of the Birth of the Báb. When only four youth showed up at the gathering that we had organized to help them plan their celebrations, and only one of them sat through the study of the guidance of the Universal House of Justice, we thought we would not be able to meet our first goal. And although we had several celebrations in the neighbourhood, none were hosted by the local youth. This moment of crisis seemed to hint that we should give more attention to strengthening the institute process in order to build the capacity of the friends in the neighbourhood.

So we began to meet every day to pray together, consult, and plan our activities for the day. To extend the reach of the community-building process, we made a list of all the families with children and junior youth participating in the educational activities and invited them to open their homes for devotional gatherings.

We looked to those who had progressed furthest along the sequence of courses and shared with them a vision of engaging with larger numbers of youth in the neighbourhood. Together, we started to plan for the first intensive institute campaign for youth. Over four weeks, we reached out to older siblings of junior youth in the programme, friends, neighbours, and others from the wider community.

Throughout the campaign, which took place over the school holidays, those who were serving as tutors were very conscious of the importance of connecting the study of the institute courses to the desire of the youth to serve in the neighbourhood and invite others to join them on this path. By the end, the participants had made plans to start activities and engage more junior youth and children, and had written down the names of friends they would invite to the next campaign.

Immediately after the campaign, while still on holiday, the newly trained youth joined the neighbourhood team in their daily pattern of study, action, and reflection. Every day they would come together to make a plan and support one another to carry it out. They also benefited from working alongside their tutors, who have experience as animators and children's class teachers. The process of initiating activities was kept very simple; tutors were conscious of not imposing their own ideas but rather focusing on the insights and principles laid out in Books 3 and 5 of the sequence of courses. The youth were given a lot of space to think about what could work best for their neighbourhood. This process has become a recurring pattern during school holidays.

We now see the youth spending two to three nights during the school week holding their own activities or accompanying someone else. They continue to meet as a big group once a week, socializing, reflecting on the past week, and planning for the next intensive institute campaign. The vision that is continually reinforced is one

of a widening circle of friends sharing the spiritual concepts they are learning about with their family and friends and inviting them to join this path of service.

With a sizeable cohort of youth now developing their capacity through the institute process and arising to carry out core activities, preparation for the bicentenary of the Birth of the Báb has been very different. It has been easier to help the youth plan their own celebrations, particularly with their junior youth groups and children's classes. Even though this time we did not set a goal for the number of celebrations hosted by youth, more than 10 such celebrations took place.

With respect to our goal of reaching 100 core activities by the bicentenary of the Birth of the Báb, we knew that it would be tough to achieve, but as the House of Justice stated, "similar to the development of a living organism, growth can occur quickly when the right conditions are in place."

Inspired by the spirit of the dawn-breakers, we pledged to further intensify our efforts to connect as many souls as possible to Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation as a gift to the Báb. After going to an institute campaign over the summer, the youth from the neighbourhood began animating junior youth groups and holding children's classes as well as engaging their families and neighbours in devotional meetings. It has been wonderful to see them work as a group, planning and reflecting together each week and accompanying each other in the field. Many of the activities are nascent, but the youth are committed to sustaining them.

On the anniversary of the Birth of the Báb, the neighbourhood surpassed 100 core activities. There is still so much more to do, but for now we are very happy and in awe of the power of this process.

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*The following two stories from North America and Europe provide insight into the dynamic process that unfolds in centres of intense activity when capacity is raised from within the local population and an expanding nucleus of friends learn alongside one another to sustain a growing pattern of activity in their unique setting.*

## UNITED STATES

The account below describes key elements observed at the level of the neighbourhood, shared by a few believers following their visit to the **Triangle** cluster:

During our visit, we met with the nuclei serving in the neighbourhoods. From the beginning, what stood out to us was the level of their outward orientation—their community-building efforts were reaching a wide cross section of local residents, including neighbours, families, networks of friends from school and work, and those met in local community spaces. We noticed that they had a strong sense of faith in the capacity of the local population to arise and take ownership of the growth process. In cycle after cycle, new groups of youth are invited to enter the institute process, while subsequent groups move along in their training.

Those serving in the neighbourhoods have a vision of raising groups of local tutors, seeing them as protagonists from the very start. The process begins with the participants studying Book 1 and Book 3 or 5 in their first campaign, Books 2 and 4 in their second campaign, and Books 6 and 7 in their third campaign, thus becoming able to serve as tutors for all the courses within a year. It was interesting to see that the institute campaigns take place at the grassroots. In different pockets within the neighbourhood, tutors are continually raising more youth to serve as resources for that specific area. They help each individual to feel part of a nucleus of friends working alongside one another.

In accompanying friends into the field of action, some creative approaches have been used. For instance, multiple junior youth groups meet at the same time and place so that the junior youth coordinator is able to visit a greater number of groups in one afternoon. This also allows the animators to support one another and new animators to feel at ease as they take ownership of their groups, particularly in relation to facilitating the texts.

In more and more areas within these neighbourhoods, a small number of individuals are gathering regularly to consult, plan, act, and reflect together. These meetings occur at various moments during the week, providing many opportunities for local friends to participate.

Many among these groups of friends are sustaining a pattern of action that includes regular camps for children and junior youth and an increasing number of family devotionals, all in addition to the educational core activities taking place in the neighbourhood. Weekly youth nights have raised capacity in whole groups of youth as they come together for prayer, reflection, study, and preparation for the week of activities. We see that a sense of collective movement has been generated.

We took particular note of how those serving in the neighbourhood are given latitude to learn in action. The members of institutions and agencies are readily available to accompany the friends, seeing to it that no one feels isolated and ensuring that knowledge and insights flow constantly between the various nuclei. We noticed that the friends have a long-term vision for growth; they are not discouraged when there is a crisis or a temporary drop in participation. While they are serving in the neighbourhood, they also feel part of a greater process contributing to the development of the cluster as a whole.

## **ITALY**

In the **Mantova** cluster, the process of growth gained impetus over a year ago when a group of 12 graduates of the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme entered the institute process and, as they walked along a path of service together, invited their peers to join them. These youth live in six localities—within village or neighbourhood settings—all situated close to one another. While part of a network of friends across the cluster, they have learned to mutually support one another within each of these small settings where the pattern of activity is advancing.

Here is how one of these youth describes the start of their journey:

Nothing was happening in our locality besides one junior youth group, which even stopped for a while. After some time, we grew up and entered the institute together with other youth.

From the beginning of their study of the institute courses—often with occasions for intensive study—some of these youth served as children’s class teachers. They learned to support and strengthen one another’s efforts in the neighbourhoods as groups of teachers, reinforcing their vision of service towards their communities and their bonds of friendship. One young person remembers the nature of their reflection when they began coming together to plan:

When we started to meet, we tried to write the names of all the children, junior youth, youth, and families we knew, and then consulted on the well-being of all. This helped us see the next steps.

After three months of maintaining their children’s classes and continuing their study of the institute courses, the youth expanded their group by inviting their friends to join them on their path of service. Together they built a common vision through the study of the youth conference materials and visited and supported existing educational activities while advancing through the sequence of courses. Many of the new youth also formed their own junior youth groups or children’s classes as a result of these efforts.

A network of some 60 youth is currently engaged in the process of community building in these six localities. At every step, they are learning to offer children’s classes and initiate junior youth groups with the support of their peers. They also study together, in various spaces, the guidance of the Universal House of Justice and explore the many questions they have about life and society. Some of the young participants have commented:

Now other friends are joining us. We all think as one group. One evening every week, we prepare; one afternoon, we are together with the children and junior youth; another day, we visit or call families, and then we are together for other activities. We spend so much time together and with other friends of ours from the neighbourhood. We have very simple devotional gatherings with our families and friends, or at school.

We are learning to be attentive to the unique talents and capacities that each one of us is developing, to analyse more deeply our reality, and to reflect regularly on the acts of service we do within our community. This is creating a new culture in our cluster as we see new possibilities each day to engage groups of youth in a powerful conversation to transform society.

As this growing band of youth has been learning in action, a widening circle of parents has been working to support this process. Among them, a group of mothers with children participating in the educational programmes is studying the sequence of courses.

Our group is made up of half youth and half mothers of junior youth and children. A group of mothers has studied Books 1, 3, and 5 and will soon start classes. It

feels as though people of different ages are all advancing on the same path and are united by the same vision. It is like being in a big family!

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*The following story from South America describes how a group of local residents who begin to act on what they are learning, gain practical experience, and show a desire to assist others, can be accompanied and trained to serve as collaborators as part of a wider system for providing support to new friends arising to serve.*

## ECUADOR

In **Manta**, a port city situated on Ecuador's central coast, the believers serving on the cluster agencies are establishing a system for accompanying teams of tutors, animators, and teachers at the neighbourhood level. This has involved raising a network of collaborators through a process of identifying, training, and visiting individuals who have gained some experience in the related educational activities and who have shown readiness to walk the path of service alongside others. Here is how the friends describe the steps they have taken:

In our efforts to identify potential collaborators, we have realized that our presence at cluster gatherings and in different spaces in the neighbourhood is essential. During our reflections, we are able to think practically about how we can accompany each of these friends and how they wish to serve. For instance, one of us might say, "I was with this youth; he has so much capacity and he spoke of the children's class and told me about the junior youth group. I think we should accompany him in this or that way." Then one of us could immediately follow up with a conversation with that youth.

Since the children's class teachers and animators work together and run their sessions alongside one another on the same day, the coordinators and Auxiliary Board members view these spaces as opportunities to find friends who could serve as collaborators.

Once we have identified a potential collaborator—often a youth—we first speak with the parents to describe the nature of this service. We then meet with the youth to explain the role of a collaborator and what the training entails. From that point onwards, we view this individual as one with the team of coordinators, swiftly including them in the process of consultation, study of the guidance, and reflection and planning at the level of the neighbourhood. One important aspect of accompanying others is having an attitude that is free of prejudice, seeing each of those around us as a potential part of a growing nucleus of friends who work together.

The practical training of new collaborators in these neighbourhoods is facilitated by the coordinators, and within the span of one month, each collaborator learns about all elements of the programme they will support.

We make an effort to take advantage of every opportunity to generate capacity in a collaborator, so that he or she learns something new each day, no matter how small.

We can take the example of how a children's class teacher is trained to be a collaborator. In the first three weeks, we review and explore together a number of key areas related to this educational imperative, such as the conversations involved in inviting children to the classes and aspects related to conducting the class itself—how to tell a story, how to teach the songs, and how to maintain harmony among the children when they are a little fidgety. Then we begin with administrative matters: collecting information about the children using lists and forms, tracking the number of classes in the neighbourhoods, and carrying out a general census. Once these areas have been covered, the collaborators go swiftly into action, initially accompanying other children's class teachers who have already gained experience over a longer period of time. This allows them to take note of any aspect they may want to suggest to other teachers.

The next phase of the training involves the collaborator accompanying different children's class teachers on their own, attending the classes, helping the teachers prepare, stepping in for them when they are absent, and organizing meetings for reflection. We see that as the collaborators learn little by little and gain experience, they begin to understand all the various functions of a coordinator.

After the initial training, a well-defined process is put in place to actively engage the collaborators for each of the three educational imperatives in advancing the work in the neighbourhood. One institute coordinator explains:

Every Sunday, I meet with the collaborators. We prepare an agenda, pray together, and deepen on the Writings or read stories to elevate our understanding. Then we see how our programme is advancing, prepare the next weekly plan, and go out into the field. The following Sunday, we reflect about what has been done throughout the week and prepare for the upcoming week. That is the rhythm we follow. Within their first week, these collaborators are accompanying tutors, and within a month, they are preparing tutor reflection gatherings and are able to organize intensive institute campaigns.

Another important step involves supporting the collaborators to continue studying the sequence of courses without interruption. It is essential that they advance through the sequence no matter what—if I am a teacher of a children's class, I might stop progressing after Book 3; if I am an animator of a junior youth group, I might get stuck at Book 5. By making these efforts, we are able to ensure that everyone continues to study with enthusiasm and complete the full sequence.

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*The following two accounts from eastern Africa and the Caribbean share glimpses of the spiritual transformation fostered by the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh in individuals, their families, and the community that surrounds them. The first story shows how the study of the main sequence of courses is empowering the women of a village through the impact of the Word of God. In the second story, the friends are extending the reach of the community-building process and witnessing its growing influence on elements of culture by engaging whole families and systematizing efforts to enhance the devotional life of more and more households in a locality.*



## UGANDA

The **Kalapata** cluster, in the eastern region of Uganda, has 25 villages in which the community-building process is established. Among the most advanced villages is **Kalengo**, where groups of women are entering and advancing through the sequence of courses. In this village, the process of growth began to gain strength around the period of the bicentenary of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh, when over a thousand attended the festivities, mostly women. As part of the follow-up efforts to bring participants into the institute process, a study circle began with a group of women, old and young. The Auxiliary Board member and her assistant served as the tutors.

The study circle became an important environment to assist the women in exploring what was going on in their lives and to talk about family life and the challenges of the community within the context of the study of the institute courses. Some of the participants had long-standing personal grievances which were known in the community and which had strained their relationships. During the study circle, they opened up to one another to discuss the matters they held at heart, and the tutors assisted them to infuse their thoughts on these matters with the Holy Writings and to explore the principles that could guide their approach to the challenges they faced.

Through their study of the courses and memorization of and reflection on the quotations, they decided to visit one another's homes to pray and start devotional gatherings. The disunity that had afflicted the residents of the village changed into loving relationships filled with laughter. This transformation was visible to other residents, and many more women became attracted to the study of Book 1.

As this initial group of women proceeded to study Book 2, three study circles began, through their assistance, with new groups of women. The deepening themes in Book 2 inspired them to act—reflecting on the life of Bahá'u'lláh moved them to arise to teach the Faith; deepening on the Nineteen Day Feast led to an increase in participation at the Feast, with many of the newly enrolled believers wanting to host; learning about love and unity in the Bahá'í community instilled in them the spirit of living in perfect harmony both in times of happiness and sorrow; and learning about contributing to the Fund inspired them to provide food, fire, and cooked meals for a junior youth camp and festival.

Some 21 women went on to complete Book 3 and began assisting in teaching children's classes that had formed. Currently there are 11 mothers conducting classes on a regular basis. The mothers are studying Book 4, with the plan to finish Book 7 by Ridván 2020. Recently, two among the group of women in the village began serving as tutors of the initial books in the sequence.

## HAITI

In the village of Grand Bassin in the **Terrier Rouge** cluster, many of the 9,000 inhabitants are aware of the Bahá'í community that is growing in their midst. Movement in the cluster began when a group of youth returned from the youth conferences in 2013, empowered with a clear vision and a desire to care for the well-being of those younger than themselves. With a galvanized spirit, they turned to their peers and invited many to join them in their efforts.

Many youth responded and, once trained, were moved to initiate, sustain, and expand children's classes and junior youth groups. Below is an account shared by a member of the community that describes how the youth instilled a spirit of worship and service in an increasing number of homes in the village.

Grand Bassin had very few devotional meetings, but after the first wave of intensive institute campaigns aimed at raising children's class teachers and animators, a group of youth who had studied Book 1 and were profoundly affected by what they had learned about the power of prayer, decided that they would foster devotional gatherings in the village. They visited home after home to speak about prayer, asking families if they wished to participate. Some people would say: "But we don't have enough space in our house; we don't have enough chairs." The group would respond, "It doesn't matter; we can pray standing in your yard, under the trees."

The spirit generated by this devotional attitude extended to the junior youth. One of the junior youth groups began to gather for prayers almost daily. Every evening, the participants visited the home of one of the members of their group to pray and sing by the light of candles or small solar lamps. Family members and neighbours would crowd in the doorways to join in. The habit of prayer began to spread. Junior youth prayed with the sick, and parents also created spaces to pray with others.

Regular dawn prayers were initiated in a common area in one of the neighbourhoods, Tikampeche, and the parents and families of children and junior youth from the classes participated. Soon, some of the parents asked to host prayers in their homes. One mother, with four children of different ages in the various educational activities, shared during dawn prayers one day that she had been told that Bahá'ís are evil and that she should not associate with them; after a conversation she had with one of the youth, her concern subsided. A few days later, her daughter shared that in the past, she had not wanted to be involved in Bahá'í activities, but now she cannot live without them. "I want to always do Bahá'u'lláh's work," she said, to which her mother added that she too cannot imagine the world without Bahá'u'lláh's Teachings. Out of the 76 households in this neighbourhood, 67 now have at least one family member participating in a core activity, and in 50 households, the entire family is involved.

To support and enhance the devotional life of the community, the Area Teaching Committee has identified a group of friends from this neighbourhood to serve as collaborators.

They visit participants who are already engaged in the educational process, sharing prayers and encouraging them to host devotional gatherings in their homes. They organize spaces for reflection, bringing together a growing number of friends to study, practise having conversations, reflect, and plan. They now aim to group households together within smaller pockets so that they can support and learn from one another, and to ensure that more of those who are hosting devotional gatherings have completed at least Book 1.

As worship and service become increasingly important in the lives of the people of a neighbourhood, even material aspects of their lives are affected. Last year, the

community faced a serious water crisis when 11 months passed without rain. The youth and junior youth decided to dig a well that would serve everyone, and the parents provided food, cement, and other resources. As others saw the impact of such an act of service aimed at the well-being of the whole community, they also dug new wells.

As the devotional character strengthens in a neighbourhood, a strong spirit of unity emerges and traditional barriers begin to fall away. In general, it is not common in our culture for youth to address adults, and adults often do not consider the views of youth important. But in this neighbourhood, adults touched by the community-building process around them listen with interest to what the youth have to say, show great appreciation for their efforts, and become inspired by their example. They are now asking for the “books” so that they too can build their capacity to transform their community.

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